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Fred K. Drogula
Providence College

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Roman Political Thought: From Cicero to Augustine.

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Roman philosophy and political thinking have received far less scholarly attention than their Greek counterparts over the years, an unfortunate fact that Dean Hammer attempts to rectify in this book. In *Roman Political Thought: From Cicero to Augustine*, Hammer examines the political thinking of nine Roman authors and the ways in which their ideas about politics differed from the ideas of Greek philosophers. Most important, he argues that Roman political thinking "does not always (in fact, rarely) exhibit the logic of a philosophic system. Instead, it exhibits the logic of practice: the assimilation of different practices, interests, and experiences into symbolic systems that orient how one makes sense of and responds to the political world" (5). Thus Hammer argues that Roman political thought was less theoretical than was the Greeks', and that Roman thinkers more practically focused on the here-and-now in an effort to make sense of the world that confronted them.

Each of Hammer's nine chapters offers an examination of the political thinking of a Roman author, organized chronologically: Cicero, Lucretius, Sallust, Virgil, Livy, Seneca, Tacitus, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustine. The length and richness of the chapters do not permit a detailed description of Hammer's nuanced treatment of each author in this review, but some key points deserve attention.

The first three chapters focus on authors of the late Republic: Cicero, Lucretius, and Sallust. Hammer studies the political ideas of each author, and in particular how they reflected on the changing nature of power and authority in the Republic, which they observed as it slowly collapsed into tyranny. In Chapter One, Hammer argues that all of Cicero's written work "is an ongoing mediation between the eternal order of the cosmos and the contingent expressions of human politics and culture" (29). He notes that Cicero differs from Plato by imagining the ideal as something within the human temporal sphere (34), and so imagines justice as a concrete concept to promote and strengthen society (41). Cicero believed that the legitimacy of politics rested on the power of the people or *societas* who comprised the state (59), and therefore it was the recourse to force (*vis*) rather than justice (*ius*) that was contributing to the collapse of the state from a public possession into a private one (68-9, 92).

In Chapter Two, Lucretius is shown to present "a poetics of power that resists what he sees as false claims to authority…The effect is to give power and authority,

terms that are exceedingly rich in Latin, a basis in nature and in turn a foundation in our senses" (96). Lucretius saw politics and the political world as natural things that had their foundation in nature (121), and therefore he criticizes Roman custom (*mos maiorum*) as "orienting behavior on behalf of the majesty (*maiestas*), or sovereign power, of the Roman state" leading one to violate "the natural bonds of justice, honor, friendship, and piety" (133). Hammer argues that Lucretius believed in the majesty of nature, but this did not urge one to escape from the world, but rather to engage with others in the world because, by the nature of things, humans are of the world (142-3). In Chapter Three Hammer argues that Sallust "does not create a city of words by wiping away memories and organizing the community by the logic of philosophy, as does Plato, but summons a political world that makes sense - and has stopped making sense - as accumulated memories and practices" (147-8). So Sallust does not idealize the past as much as use it to explore contemporary political problems, and to demonstrate that men who sought individual power over the state had been (and could be) restrained and subdued only by the might of the Roman people (178-9).

The remaining six chapters focus on the political thinking of authors from the Imperial Era. Chapters Four and Five focus respectively on Virgil and Livy, two authors who wrote under Augustan patronage and reflected on the collapse of the Republic and the building of a new type of state under the emperor. Hammer argues that Virgil's political ideas do not focus on Roman institutions, but rather are an effort "to re-imagine community - to restore tangibility - in the age of the principate" (186). His poetry explores how a destroyed world is transformed into a rebuilt world, and how "the disorienting violence of wandering and exile" becomes the "foundation of a common inheritance" (215). Similarly, Livy identifies liberty (*libertas*) as the animating concept of Roman politics (242 and 249), and he presents liberty as something "negotiated in the actions of a community and not the will of one individual" (232). Livy's political thought "is aimed at recovering (or extending) an impulse toward a collective purpose" (238), and he "locates this possibility of restoration in the Roman idea of multiple founders" (259).

Chapters Six and Seven explore later authors who were far less optimistic about the imperial government. In Chapter Six, Hammer focuses on Seneca's use of the concept of jurisdiction to signify "the ability of the mind to distinguish between the 'boundaries' (*modi*) of truth and the boundlessness of the imagination" (292). Seneca believed the principate had altered the ability or jurisdiction of thinkers to judge between truth and imagination, creating a condition of insanity because the world "perverts the political, legal, and social markers by which Romans define and orient

themselves" (296). To navigate the Roman world, Seneca "is attempting to identify the enduring bond, something more than pure instrumentality or naked self-interest, by which one can engage in the contingent relationships of community life" (319). This bond is gratitude, which Seneca believes holds society together. Similarly, in Chapter Seven, Hammer suggests that Tacitus is trying to show his readers "how to understand and navigate through a despotic world" (323). The despotic madness of the emperors is associated with unmediated politics (335), which forces men to choose between the riskiness of protest or the depravity of affirming the emperor's will (342). The unpredictable madness of the emperors corrodes the fundamental principles of society, destroying those principles by which people orient themselves (345, 348). Tacitus presents *exempla* like Thrasea and Agricola to re-establish "the mental map by which one navigates the political terrain" (357).

The stoicism of Marcus Aurelius is the subject of Chapter Eight, which Hammer argues "is neither a philosophy of detachment nor a justification for the status quo…but a much more complex re-imagining, by way of Roman culture, of one's place in a *cosmopolis*" (360). While Marcus follows Epictetus in many aspects of his stoicism, the emperor adds a stronger civic element to his thinking about how the soul should conform with nature (366), believing that the soul could achieve happiness while in life by orientating itself properly in space and time, including directing itself to some proper goal (373-4). Rationality, therefore, requires people to work together, being both social and civic (377).

The last chapter of the book focuses on Augustine, whom Hammer presents as a culmination of Roman political thought and a conclusion to his book. Hammer argues that Augustine believed that human society is held together by a type of love (God) that inspires humility, forgiveness, and compassion (386), and therefore politics is the organization of the society's desire for that love (397). Hammer suggests that, because of his recognition of the great complexity of human existence, Augustine "reflects the culmination of—even provides the psychological premises for—Roman political thought's resistance to perfectibility" (418). Augustine derived his ideas about the *civitas* from traditional Roman political thinking, which focused not on institutions but on "the affective ties that are born of history and experience" (425). Hammer compares Augustine to Cicero, both of whom imagined the *res publica* or *civitas* as a "relationship of people, a *societas*, or joining of *socii*" rather than as a set of institutions (426). As a result, Augustine articulates the "yearnings of Roman political thought: the realm of *securitas* (freedom from anxiety), *libertas* (which Augustine defines as our obedience to God), and *beatitudo finis* (final happiness)" (428). Hammer concludes this chapter and the book with the observation, "Augustine's tragic conception of politics comes out of a Roman experience that never retreated

from an awareness of its own origins in homelessness, the violence that both forged and divided the Republic, and the loss of the *libertas* it prized most. Augustine's political thought is the culmination of Roman thought precisely because it offers neither an escape nor a retreat from our own care for a political world that is as flawed as it is dear" (430).

These brief descriptions only scratch the surface of Hammer's examination of each author's political thought. Each chapter provides a lengthy and detailed discussion of a single author, and Hammer's research is very thorough: his analysis of the ancient authors is nuanced and penetrating, he carefully incorporates the work of other modern scholars, and he gives extensive notes and a very full bibliography that direct the reader to further research. Not only does Hammer give a full discussion of the ideas of each author, but he delves deeply into related topics that provide important context. For example, the chapter on Lucretius gives ample attention to Epicurus, and the chapter on Marcus Aurelius similarly presents the ideas of Epictetus.

Each chapter is a full study into the political thinking of a Roman author, and as such, each chapter tends to stand on its own as an independent and self-contained inquiry. While later chapters do occasionally refer back to earlier chapters, and the final chapter does pull together several common ideas, the book on the whole is written more like a collection of studies on Roman political thinkers than an examination of the development of Roman political thinking. This is not a criticism, since this organization will make the book immensely useful for readers wanting to delve into the political thinking of one author at a time, or readers who want to study some authors and not others.

The subject, organization, and scholarship of this book seem intended for those who specialize in the study of the ancient world, but Hammer includes lengthy background discussions that bring less expert readers up to speed with the historical and literary developments that give context to his main inquiries. The book has been put together beautifully, each chapter is usefully divided into clear sections, and typos are very few and far between. On the whole, the book is a notable scholarly achievement that not only restores Roman political thinkers to their proper dignity and importance, but also reveals the diversity, complexity, and nuance of Roman political thought. Hammer expands our understanding of philosophers such as Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, and he draws attention to authors less commonly recognized as important political thinkers. His book will certainly be a valuable asset to scholars working in any field that touches upon Roman political thought.

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Fred K. Drogula
Providence College